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By-Rousseau, G.S.
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The teacher's and the student's plight with literature as it is being taught in colleges and universities today is discussed. Neither answers nor solutions are suggested. Instead problems that stem from the following situations are examined: (1) the heterogeneous population of undergraduate English classes, (2) the lack of a clear definition of what English is, (3) the student's lack of interest in the literature and life of past ages, and (4) the student's concern with communication and insistence that literature relate to his present life and needs. (BN)

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What's Wrong With Our Teaching Of English?

TO THOSE OF US who teach English and who reflect, however briefly, on the success of our teaching and the nature of our students, one truth is clear. Somehow we are failing. The reasons for this failure are less clear, but the fact of the failure itself is lucidly evident. Occasionally one meets or hears about a bright young college teacher of English who enthralls his students and whose students adore him. And one says, how nice, how extraordinary, how fine! But as I stand at the head of my classes, I see more usual attitudes reflected in facial expressions of boredom, apathy, gloom, despair, and even horror. Perhaps these moods are nothing more than evidence of my own poor teaching, but I think not: they reflect, instead, the whole mood and tone of the modern student's plight with English literature as it is being taught in colleges and universities across the nation.

As I said, the reasons for our failure are blurry and elusive—anything but obvious. Almost any single explanation seems unbearably reductionistic and wrapped in greater complexity. And while "a number of factors—historical, literary, educational, and pedagogic" appears the more satisfactory answer, these, too, seem to miss the point, to evade the larger implications of the failure.

One could argue, for example, that departments of English today boast more majors than almost any field. At Harvard, English, History, and Social Relations are the most "popular" subjects—if one counts heads. But surely the reasons for the apparent popularity of English go far beyond love of learning, of literature, or commitment to the profession of letters. Undergraduates choose English for numerous reasons *other* than the subject itself. English is easy and general, requires no special vocabulary or set of difficult symbols, and is adequate

G. S. ROUSSEAU, B.A. Amherst '62, M.A. Princeton '64, Ph.D. ibid. '66, is Instructor of English and a tutor in Leverett House. His most recent study of English literature, to be published by Princeton University Press this spring, is *This Long Disease My Life: Alexander Pope and Science.* Mr. Rousseau and some of his tutees appear in the uppermost photograph at left, which was taken by Stephen J. Potter '69. All other illustrations for this article were planned and photographed by Christopher S. Johnson '64.

pre-preparation for careers in business, law, the State Department, finance, social work, journalism, the Peace Corps, and on and on as far as movie-making, sailing yachts, and managing chains of Italian pizzerias. Moreover, one can always think of something to say about *Hamlet,* even if one hasn't read the play, and in how many other majors (try physics, biochemistry, or Ancient Greek to start with) can you get away with that? Further, anyone with a modicum of intelligence can read his native tongue, and if the student can't understand Chaucer or Shakespeare, let him read Faulkner or Hemingway, and if he can't do that, let him write poetry or sell pretzels: English faculty members are not infrequently the most tolerant of professors, and more usually than not, anything goes. In brief, English is a gut.

NOT SO, the serious student replies, if you wish to do well; if you seek distinction, a *summa cum laude,* or other accolades (like getting into a top graduate school). And here is where the trouble—the reasons for the failure—of explanation begins. Perhaps no other academic area is so besieged with heterogeneity of backgrounds, talents, and ambitions. This raises for every teacher of college English the question, to whom do I cater? Often the teacher is unable or unprepared to instruct his best students, but in universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, where teachers of English are often distinguished critics and scholars in their own right, the problem of the teacher's ability to instruct and delight would seem not to exist. But it does. For the student replies, once again, "distinguished" in what sense? If X or Y is an international authority on Donne or Pope, this doesn't mean he can teach. Instruct us maybe, but not delight us. For we are not interested in Donne or Pope, and his status as a respected authority on these authors does not imply that he communicates to us his own excited sense of their importance.

If the student's line of argument were to end at this point, the solution would be simple simon: let all Donne and Pope scholars communicate excitedness! But the student, if you listen to him, has only begun, and his questions of relevance are to follow. Stated baldly, his case goes like this: I don't really care about John Donne or Alexander Pope, one a melancholic divine, the other a Catholic cripple; I'm not really interested in Donne's world or Pope's society; their poems aren't aesthetically pleasing in the way that those of Yeats and Eliot are; in short, I read them only because they are assigned. The same would probably be said of Spenser, Jonson, Herbert, Crashaw, Milton, James Thomson, and tens of other pre-Romantic poets, to say nothing of prose writers. Donne and Pope, in addition, have little or no relevance to careers in business, law, and film-making. The fact that Professor X is president of the Pope Society of America is not only unimpressive, it is downright proof of pedantry—that he spends his time collecting footnotes (I was tempted to say fossils, repeating the charge of a former student).

If Donne and Pope won't illuminate my life, I don't want them: If their poetry cannot help solve my identity crisis—as can Hamlet, when taught by the "right" man, not the president of the Shakespeare Scholars—I won't read them for love, but out of a sense of obedience. So goes the argument of the nineteen-year-old.

The frightening aspect of the problem is that Donne and Pope (no more than most other poets before 1800, roughly) probably cannot help solve typical identity crises, cannot become "relevant." And further, that nineteen-year-olds will continue to experience identity crises, among other things. We can no more expect undergraduates to give up their identity crises than expect Dearborn to stop producing Fords. It is a fact of life.

Then either make Donne and Pope "relevant," the intelligent student implores, or chuck them by the wayside. The professor explains that the world of Donne's poetry and prose was vastly remote from our own, that Augustan England was radically different from America in 1968 and finally, that however much he wishes it were otherwise, Donne's religious problems and Pope's moral ones are epochs away from Vietnam, LSD, and the Sexual Revolution; that the student must develop some historical imagination to understand these authors, and must understand what their words meant. All this while, nagging at the back of

his mind, is the student's initial question—why are Donne and Pope relevant to me and my life at this time?

It is probable that the student himself does not comprehend all the ramifications of his question. Though he probably enjoys a greater awareness of the problem than does his teacher (whose own identity crises probably occurred several decades ago), he is still groping. In today's scientific and technological world, the student of English inevitably feels queasy about his area of concentration, its vague perimeters and undefined regions. Problems in mathematics and physics have objective answers; English has none. The problems themselves are problematic in the study of literature. He is surrounded by specialists of every variety and wonders why he is not a specialist. Not that he wishes to become one, but in numbers and majorities there lies strength. Surrounded by a fast-moving world in which facts of every sort are essential, he can barely remember 1066 and 1798. The facts of his field he considers useless, especially when they describe Shakespeare's bathtub, but he sees his scientific comrades busily searching for more and more facts, more and more data, and the queasiness returns. He comforts himself with the knowledge that English 100 won't last forever, but the insecurity still persists. Form and function, form and content, style and sense—these claptraps of jargon no longer enthrall him, as they once did, nor can they excite him as his psychologist roommate is excited by recent research in brain theory, dreams, and the physiology of memory. Underneath he wishes he were something other than "an English concentrator," but he doesn't know what, and doubts that he could do something important —like nuclear physics or topology. He is the only amateur among experts. Even the worst history majors have vaster knowledge than he, are greater specialists than he. He doubts that he can recite more than twenty lines by heart, and he isn't sure which century Donne lived in. English may offer him a feeling of being part of a certain "in-group," sensitive and delicate, perhaps long-haired and eccentric—but then he rightly suspects that this temporary condition cannot last forever, and that his culture respects and admires scientists only. While his friends are dreaming of Ph.D.'s in abstruse realms, he awaits the day he can embark upon business or the law, and finally become—free.

PART OF the student's difficulty has nothing to do with himself. The history of the teaching of English literature in this country from 1930 to the present is largely responsible for his unhappiness. Since then, high-school teaching of English has deteriorated—one proof being the very small number of entering college freshmen who indicate English as their chosen field of study: math is made more attractive to them. On the college level, the New Criticism (methods taught by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren) removed the ideas from literature and left it with form only. The old standby, "form and content," was reduced to form alone. College students today cannot be sufficiently aroused by form bereft of ideas. Their world teems with ideas; they are forever searching for new ones. The new idea pleases. Were we to "put back" ideas into literature, the situation might well improve; but even here I am skeptical, since few modern men can deny that brain theory is more interesting than the New Science of Bacon or Restoration politics. This is to say nothing of the dull drudgery of graduate school in English, which undergraduates hear about from the day they sign their concentration cards. That this is untrue is irrelevant: the point is, they *think* it is true. They hear about the least rewarding aspects only: counting caesuras in Chapman, or compiling bibliographies about Trollope's brothers. From the academic grapevine they hear that fellowships there are niggardly compared to the sciences, that one goes into debt, that no employer wants a kid with a degree in English, that the average number of years it takes to get an advanced degree is astronomical, that afterwards, life is publish or perish. Under this grave weight the undergraduate collapses—understandably. If this isn't enough to upset him, the Vietnam war torments him, prevents him from discovering himself at his own pace.* He hovers between Donne scholars and draft officials, trapped and doomed.

More subtle is his distrust of the kind of knowledge critics and scholars today have. If he abhors the Shakespeare's-bathtub approach to literature, he is even less tolerant of the vague and abstract generalizations (he calls them by another name) of his colleagues and teachers. He knows inwardly that he can conjure better "cepts," though they have no relation to the facts. While his friends are breaking the barriers of knowledge by studying the contents of electrons and helping cure cancer, he is the last Renaissance Man—contemplating life and death. But he knows that the Renaissance is dead and that he, consequently, is something of a fraud: in this specialized society one asks the cardiologist about the heart, and so on down the line, and no one asks him about anything—because he knows nothing (not even himself). He has heard mention of the great literary industries—the Yale Walpole and Boswell, the Columbia Milton, the California Dryden, the Wesleyan Fielding, and now the Iowa Smollett—but he doesn't really understand what these are all about: he thinks of them as so many more bathtubs, and just imagine devoting a lifetime to the study of Horace Walpole or James Boswell! A man may have read all *n* million of Walpole's letters and still misunderstand himself. The paradox is between meaningless facts and non-useful abstractions: science, he thinks, is a clear-cut case of right and wrong answers, a discipline where facts alone are significant. All this adds to his onus and sense of guilt.

BUT THERE IS something else too. Students of English, today perhaps more than ever, have a deep intuitional sense that the humanities are dead. If not positively dead, at least dying. They consider departments of English to be the last strongholds of the older humanism. Indeed they wish, like Matthew Arnold, they could end the creeping wave of scientific predominance and return to an older and gayer world. English, I have been told over and over again by my students, is a study where all involved can afford to pause and reflect upon why we do this or that, why we should read A or B. They will acknowledge, of course, that professors of organic chemistry would have nervous fits if asked the question, why is Chemistry

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*It is my impression that the present war in Vietnam has very seriously impeded the college student's personal growth and his chances of self-discovery, but this is another story, which to my knowledge has received little attention in print.

important to me? But nevertheless, English should remain general and relaxed, should confront the large questions, should debate the draft and the war and the definition of an intellectual. They cannot understand that many of their teachers are no less "scientists" than the men in the white coats. Studying the folios of Shakespeare or Pope's manuscripts, annotating Walpole's letters, dating holographs—these pursuits are every whit as "scientific" and objective as protons. They fail (and I am not condemning but trying to comprehend them) to observe that the prophets of wisdom have themselves become victimized by the Age of Specialization, were hired in the first place because they could edit Pope's manuscripts; that their sensitivity to a literary work may be no greater than that of the man in the street. But that they have a *trade*—and here is the point—a trade that is specialized and highly commercial, but not necessarily interesting to the immediate consumer. The professor's specialization is proof to the student that the humanities are dead. One need examine nothing more than the word humanities itself. There is nothing human or humane about folios, manuscripts, or the history of ideas—the argument goes. The only solace is that Classics is even deader. To the college student, the writing is on the wall: the best talent is being attracted to the sciences and it isn't even clear today just what the study of English should be. There has been no prophet to turn the tide since the New Critics. All is one wasteland; "Universal darkness buries all." And he himself a failure.

CLEARLY, undergraduates are no more oppressed by the metaphysics of John Donne than by the esoteric paraphernalia of other disciplines. The sense of vanished relevance is a perennial source of anxiety for teachers of everything. Everywhere. But the myth that English is the last stronghold, the last outpost, of the humanities still persists: the point is not that English actually *is* more painful than, say, chemistry, biology, or Ancient Greek history, but that it ought not be painful at all. Undergraduates expect English to be general, beautiful, vague, delightful, ever treating the large, the powerful and the important. Somewhere in the recess of their mind's eye they harbor the Arnoldian belief that English should search for "ever fresh knowledge." And they are dismally bored and made weary by the study of paraphernalia that is unable to produce one ounce of fresh knowledge. All the trouble lies in the simple fact that students of English expect *this* subject to transcend the pettiness of others. Because the undergraduate studying English considers himself in some sense a "contemporary humanist"—as much as this is possible today—his real concern is with communication. As I lecture on Donne and Pope I cannot help but sense the students' uneasiness: their faces say, Donne and Pope are irrelevant to the *new* communication, and by this we do not mean crass, uncherished aural-visual-physical- sensation, or the cult of hyperstimuli, but rather the common truth of *Rhinoceros, Blow-up,* and Marshall McLuhan. One very brilliant undergraduate at Harvard wrote me: "Undeceive us! Let the English Department abjure its unmerited aura of 'popularity,' and live with its own abysmal truth: then, counting the rings of Shakespeare's bathtub with precision would be no less honorable than measuring those of Newton's. Do not let us enroll our college years in the hopeless pursuit of a humanism that is no longer to be found in literature. Give us the new communication without false pretences."

A curious thing is that little of this is true of graduate students. They are, of course, "committed," older, and more sophisticated; and they usually have chosen the teaching of English as a profession. Unlike undergraduates, they deplore generalities. Thoroughly professional and resigned to the footnote aspect of their chosen vocation, they desire the very opposite: bathtubs and sinks are welcome, particularly since these help pave the way for the graduate student's own publications. The fact that the Yale Walpole has reached volume 37 is of some importance and of tremendous interest to all: the graduate student greedily dreams of the Lehigh Longfellow or the Skidmore Skelton. There is no limit to his professional possibilities in a world where education has become a major industry and the teaching of English a commodity for many consumers. He even dreams of a Nobel given someday for "the Texas Twain." But there, still lurking and searching, nineteen and probably neurotic, in the midst of the seeming chaos, is the brooding undergraduate, more intelligent, more demanding than ever before.

SINCE WE are his teachers, his problems must in some sense be ours. It would, however, be disingenuous of me to pretend that I have the solutions. I have no answers, and at

best, hope for some awareness of the profundity of the problem. I write this not to pose solutions but to comprehend circumstances—expressions of ennui and intellectual fatigue. I am a historical scholar, thoroughly persuaded that the combination of teaching and engaging in research in my field makes me content. Concerned with facts and ideas as well as the shape and tone of literary forms, I make no pretensions to revolutionize the study of literature. At the beginning of each new term I tell my undergraduate students not to expect miracles or prophecies: I am not Cassandra: I tell them that I am basically a pedant, and that they should expect no more than intelligent footnotes on the literary works they are reading. That the tenor of my mind is far closer to the scientist's than to that of certain incomprehensible and irrational critics of literature. That I feel defensive towards undergraduate students of English only, not to third-year Ph.D. candidates or professional colleagues. That I wish the commodity I sell could be consumed with greater ease; despite the wish I am aware of the problem of relevance. Finally, that the subject, English literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, must stand on its two feet if it is to remain an area of vital interest to hordes of undergraduates. That I shall not attempt to transform myself, Proteus-like, into a god, substituting, as it were, myself for the subject. "The style is nothing less than the man himself" is a romantic notion coined over two hundred years ago by Buffon as applicable to literary texts only. It should not serve as a teacher's manual for classroom conduct. Nor will I pervert the works themselves —Donne and Pope— to make them palatable. Pope must be read as Pope and not as Faulkner, or as Faulkner may have read and interpreted Pope. I know that if my menu contained more Faulkner and less Pope, more T. S. Eliot and less Donne, that the grimaces would be less severe, the intellectual fatigue less stringent, but like the majority of my colleagues I still believe—perhaps blindly—that the record of the past is valuable; that literature of long ago is the record of man's past sufferings, and as such, delights and instructs us for our own lives. That the greatest literature I know is ethical and didactic, moral and religious, not realistic and titillating. Literature is not life.

ALL THIS I tell my students, but with the knowledge that somehow, somewhere, some aspect of the communication itself is barren. Somehow they still wish literature to be life: their own life. In this country, where Youth is glamorized and idealized more than in any other country in the world, it is not strange that English literature hundreds of years old should be lacking the vital aspects of life that so greatly concern modern youth. And thus I whisper again and again to them: I understand, I understand. To my older and perhaps more sober audiences, to my colleagues, I turn about and roar, English literature must somehow become revitalized and rehabilitated, if we, the educators, the interpreters to the young, are to maintain our integrity and honestly earn our bed and board.